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It's time to tackle homophobia in football once and for all

Why is players' sexual orientation still an issue in football? And why are there not more gay role models in the sport?



Colin Jackson

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It's to be hoped that we soon reach the day when a person's sexual orientation is only as remarkable as the colour of their eyes.

So when Welsh athletics legend [Colin Jackson spoke publicly about his sexuality last week](#), the most interesting and welcome result was that there was so little adverse reaction to the news that he was gay.

This is not in any way to imply that homophobia no longer exists or to diminish what must have been a difficult decision to speak openly about such a sensitive, personal issue – but Jackson’s seemingly very [relaxed chat](#) with Swedish former athlete Kajsa Bergqvist and Peter Häggström notably coincided with [Pride Cymru](#) and Cardiff’s fabulous celebration of lesbian, gay bi-sexual and transgender communities in Wales.



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The point is that public attitudes toward sexuality have shifted dramatically in the last two decades and sports people coming out as gay is no longer as unusual or remarkable as it may once have been.

As Jackson himself stated in a 2008 interview with the Voice newspaper: “It’s the 21st century. I don’t think anybody thinks about that any more. There might have been a stigma in years gone by.”

ALSO: [The Pinc List 2017: The 40 most influential LGBT people in Wales](#)

Well, maybe. Because it was the above quote that led the professor and cultural commentator [Ellis Cashmore](#) to indicate in a tweet that in terms of football, players’ sexual orientation is still very much an issue.

And of course, he is right.

As self-styled [men's magazine GQ pointed in July this year](#), officially there are no gay players in the Premier league.

In 2014 the only openly gay player in the whole of the UK's professional or semi professional top six divisions was Cleethorpes winger Liam Davis, then at Gainsborough Town.

He told the BBC of the many things which would discourage a player from coming out: "There are lots of things to consider. The media, agents, tens of thousands of opposition fans – so I can understand why people would be worried about it."

The fear of abuse

Pink News, the online newspaper marketed to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, recently addressed the issues raised by Davis stating the lack of role models available to young gay footballers was also a factor in why none had yet come out.

It's now 27 years since [Justin Fashanu](#), nearing the end of his career, came out. Imagine today, [asked journalist Josh Jackman](#), the pressures of being the first gay premier-ship footballer having to become a civil rights role model on top of the day-to-day pressures inherent in the life of an elite sportsman.

Justin Fashanu (Image: Allsport)

Then there is the fear of ridicule and abuse from spectators. In 2013, the Brighton and Hove Supporters Club and the Gay Football Supporters' Network (GFSN) recorded the insults and name calling at the hands of opposing fans and found that in more than 50% of Brighton's games that season their fans had been targeted with homophobic chants.

It's sad to report that on Brighton's promotion to the Premier league this season it appears nothing has changed. On August 21st [Leicester City were moved to condemn the homophobic chanting](#) that took place during their home game against Brighton which saw some fans removed from the stadium.

We live in an era where social media is increasingly toxic in nature. With alarming regularity, those in the public eye are routinely verbally attacked by total strangers, some of whom threaten physical violence and murder.

It's easy then, to envisage the despair and helplessness that could reasonably engulf that first top level footballer of the modern era to come out.

Indeed, the whole media circus that would inevitably be a result from such a move leads Liam Davis to state that if a Premier League footballer were to come out as gay he may feel like a "[sacrificial lamb](#)".

But there are reasons for optimism....

But there are opposing views and even with all I've just written in mind there are some reasons for optimism. An inquiry by the culture, media and sport select committee in 2016 stated that football fans were now more accepting of homosexuality.

Mark McCormack, a sociologist at Durham University [told the Guardian](#) some of the changes in attitude were brought about by "young people who have positive experiences of interacting with LGBT peers in school".

Academics who have researched this area, such as Rory McGrath and Jamie Cleland, have found that British football has seen a dramatic improvement in its attitudes towards homosexuality.

McGrath argues that it is only a minority of fans who engage in homophobic behaviour and most clubs are swift to act upon cases when they are encountered.

A [poll conducted for the BBC in 2016](#) found that 82% of supporters would have no issue with their club signing a gay player. Perhaps it's fair to say then that the online abuse gay footballer could face would be strongly countered by messages of support.

Kick It Out, football's equality and inclusion organisation, [as its website states](#), has partnered with the Home Office to release a series of informative and engaging resources that raise awareness of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic (HBT) discrimination within football stadia. This is only one of many measures initiated to challenge existing prejudices.

Then there are the voices of players such as Joey Barton, Kevin Nolan and Lukas Podolski who have all stated their support for gay footballers.

Indeed, just last week the most expensive signing of last summer, Manchester United's [Paul Pogba stated](#) at a Uefa Respect event that an openly gay player would receive respect.

“Why not?” he said, “What he does in his private life has nothing to do with the player.”

But while things have undoubtedly improved since the era of Justin Fashanu, the simple fact is that no top level footballer is openly gay.

Football must continue to strive to engineer an environment where sexual preference is irrelevant.

READ MORE: [Welsh clubs join forces in campaign aiming to tackle homophobia in football](#)

It appears the clubs and the players are engaged in that process – it’s now up to the majority of fair-minded fans to drown out the vocally bigoted.

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